



## **THE POPPY MENACE IN MANIPUR: CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES AND RESPONSES**

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### **Abstract**

India is sandwiched between two largest opium/heroin producing regions in the world—the Golden Crescent in Afghanistan and the Golden Triangle in the adjoining regions of Myanmar, Thailand and Laos. Traditionally, Northeast India, particularly the state of Manipur, has been a major transit route in illicit drug trade originating from the Golden Triangle. But in the recent years, in Manipur, there has been a tremendous increase in the cultivation and production of poppy which remain a primary component of a thriving opium/drug economy. This could have been a fallout of the declining trend in Myanmar’s poppy production. This has been a major challenge to the state of Manipur which has been reeling under political and armed conflict for more than six decades. Considering the menace, the government of Manipur has taken several steps under “War on Drugs 2.0” campaign. In this context this study attempts to analyze the genesis, issues and challenges of the rapid increase in the poppy plantation/cultivation in Manipur.

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## INTRODUCTION

The poppy plant (scientific name *papaver somniferum*) is the primary source of opium, a highly addictive non-synthetic narcotic drug. It is cultivated all over the globe, both legally and illegally. The two regions with the highest levels of illegal opium production are the Golden Crescent, covering the countries of Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan; and Golden Triangle, covering the adjoined countries of Myanmar, Thailand and Laos. The two regions are centers of a thriving opium economy and narcotics (Zahan, 2022). Between these two major global producers of opium and heroin, India is situated like a sandwich. This paper will focus on the Indian state of Manipur, located in the country's northeast region, bordering Myanmar. Myanmar is the world's second largest poppy grower and largest source of opium among the Golden Triangle countries (Opium Poppy Cultivation in the Golden Triangle, 2006). According to the Myanmar Opium Survey 2022, opium production in 2022 has been the highest since 2013, producing 870 metric tons (United Nations, 2023). Manipur sharing borders with Myanmar (approx. 398 km) has always been a favorable transit route for smuggling drugs to other parts of the country and beyond. (It is evident from various reports that) There is no doubt that cross border smuggling of drug has increased in the recent years, the cultivation and poppy and manufacturing of drugs is also said to be shifting from the Golden Triangle to Northeast India, particularly Manipur.

Manipur is a state located in India's northeastern region, covering an area of 22,327 sq. km. It is beautifully framed or surrounded by hilly ranges; and also bordered internally by the states of Nagaland, Assam, and Mizoram and externally by Myanmar. The international boundary which Myanmar and Manipur together shared is 398 km. The state of Manipur is resided by its people with multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious. Major ethnic groups represented in this region include Meiteis/Meeteis, Kukis, Pangals (Manipur Muslims), and Nagas. Manipur is an isolated state with a distinctive topographic Himalayan Range extension. Hills make up more than 90% of the entire geographic region, with valleys making up the remaining 10%. Popularly, this valley portion is known as Imphal Valley. This 1,787 sq. km. small valley is surrounded by nine hill ranges. This tiny area is where the majority of the state's residents reside. According to Census 2011, there are 28.56 lakh people living in the state. Imphal East, Imphal West, Thoubal, Bishnupur, Jiribam, Kakching, and Senapati are the districts that make

up the state's valley region. Ukhrul, Churachandpur, Chandel, Senapati, Tamenglong, Kangpokpi, Kamjong, Tengnoupal, Noney and Pherzawl are the districts that make up the state's hilly region.

In the recent years, the drug cartels in Myanmar have switched from creating plant-based drugs like heroin and opium, which require space and are reliant on enormous amounts of labour and the weather, to synthetic drugs like methamphetamine, which are less expensive and simpler to create (Leong, 2021). The cultivation and manufacturing of poppies is allegedly shifting from Golden Triangle to Northeast India, particularly Manipur. Manipur has already experienced a variety of unrest, including armed conflicts, insurgency issues, ethnic violence, high prevalence of HIV/AIDS positive cases and also known for its transit route for drug trade.

Act East Policy, 2014 was put into effect by the Indian government in 2014 under the direction of BJP. With the help of this policy, India seeks to strengthen its links to Southeast Asian nations by encouraging economic collaboration, cultural exchanges and strategic alliances. This policy will encourage many immigrants to enter Manipur easily for the purpose of engaging in cross-border drug smuggling as well as encouraging poppy plant cultivation. The Manipur-Myanmar border is fenced less than 10%, creating easy transit point for illegal drugs heading to Northeast India from the Golden Triangle, the intersection of the borders with Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand, which is home to a booming opium industry and drug trade (Zahan, 2022).

To counter the rising poppy menace the government of Manipur launched the "War on Drug" campaign since 2018. As apart of the campaign, alternative crops were introduced in some areas of the districts as part of government initiatives. Cardamom and lemongrass were identified as substitute crops to replace poppy (Kipgen, 2019). But the issue of whether this substitute crop can rival poppies arises. According to the farmer, the only way to end poverty is to grow poppies on a far-off hill outside the purview of law enforcement organizations/agencies like the police, Assam Rifles, NAB, etc. The poppy growers cleared jungles, hills, and even lands in order to boost poppy cultivation output. The natural cycle was disrupted by this extensive deforestation, and as a result, many people experience frequent diseases, floods, and droughts every year. This practice not only has an impact on drug users but

also poses a serious danger to the lives of residents of both plain valleys and hilly areas. The hill areas, inhabited by Schedule Tribes are being widely used for poppy cultivation—the unripe seed pod which is used to produce opium (Zahan, 2022).

### **Genesis of the Problem: The Golden Triangle**

After the Chinese Civil war of 1949, the Communist party of China (CPC) under Chairman Mao Tse-Tung got its victory against Kuomintang party led by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek. The communist revolution led to the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Kuomintang (KMT) force retreated to Formosa (Taiwan), in the east and another remnant escaped into Shan state of Northeastern Burma. Later under the General Li Mi of Kuomintang, entered the Kengtung Mountains and shielded themselves in the hilly area of Mong La (or Mong Hsat) in the Thai-Burma border. Kuomintang force determined that the war was not over and will continue its revolt against Communist party of China for their homeland.

Through its embassy in Bangkok, Taiwan was contacted by the KMT forces in the Shan Hills. Instead of evacuation to Taiwan, it was decided to transform the Nationalist Chinese soldiers in the Shan Hills into a "liberation army," which would establish bases in northeastern Burma, and from there try to retake China from the Communists. The modest Mong Hsat airfield, which was erected during World War Two, was expanded into a powerful air base that could accommodate C-46 and C-47 cargo aircraft that brought in weapons, ammo, and medical supplies. Additionally, the KMT trained fresh recruits from the border regions, primarily Lahu hill tribesmen. The Kengtung based "secret" KMT army tried on no less than seven occasions between 1950 and 1952 to invade Yunnan, but was repeatedly driven back into the Shan States (Lintner, 2000, page 7).

In 1950, the United State wanted a deal made between CIA and KMT to gather intellect information and involved in guerilla warfare in Yunnan against China's Communist to make a full-stop in spreading of communism. Despite receiving financial assistance from the CIA, the KMT sought more sources of funding to enable them expand their operations against the communists and bolster their local bases. As a result, given the anarchy and access to vast tracts of uninhabited terrain where they were stationed, they entered the illegal opium trade. The KMT secured and transported the opium, which was primarily cultivated by the indigenous populace, to syndicates in Thailand,

where it was later processed into heroin and exported to other nations. (Leong, 2021). Thus the opium economy of the Golden Triangle was developed into full swing.

On 22 April 1953, U Nu (Independent Burma's first Prime Minister) brought up issue in the UN General Assembly to adopt a resolution calling for the KMT party to give up its weapons and leave the nation. Because of Burma's government reaction to KMT, they evacuate to Taiwan and simultaneously reinforcements were brought to Mong Hsat using flight at night. Then the number of armed soldiers of KMT increases to 12,000 in Shan State of Burma at the end of 1953. With the increase of KMT soldiers, Burmese army were unsuccessful to stand against them. To manage the troops, weapons and consumptions; they need financial support to continue their revolt.

General Tuan Shi-wen, a renowned KMT commander, in mid 1960s gave a word in an interview: "Necessity knows no law. That is why we deal with opium. We have to continue to fight the evil of communism. To fight, you must have an army. An army must have guns. To buy guns, you must have money. And in these mountains? The only money is opium."

The vast majority of the opium traded from Burma to Thailand or Laos was conducted by the KMT troops, secretly supported by CIA after their flight from southern China to Burma's Shan State (Chouvy, 2013, page 6). The area's annual output had only reached 30 tonnes when the KMT had first arrived. However, the KMT convinced the hill tribes to increase their opium production. They did this by imposing a high opium tax, which made the farmers to increase their production even further in order to survive. The Golden Triangle's Burmese region saw a 10-20 fold increase in opium output by the mid-1950s, reaching an annual yield of 300-600 tonnes.

The KMT invasion and the government's rebel force encircled the hill tribes of Shan state. Hill tribes were not treated in a better condition due to the instability incident having between these two forces. At Rangoon University, Shan students started to form a movement that aimed to support Shan culture and literature and which also increase more hostile to the government's troops. Using the army and its Military Intelligence Services (MIS), the Burmese government attempted to suppress the nascent Shan nationalism movement, but the effort backfired: young Shans groups made their way into the Jungle, where they set up armed guerrilla

forces. The first conflict between the Shan rebels and the government troops occurred in 1959.

Due to the invasion of KMT, the practice of rice based economy of village tribes of Shan state had critically destructed. Many farmers abandoned their paddy farms and moved to the hills, where they could only successfully cultivate the poppy, where the demands for drug was gradually rising. Previously, some hill tribes and Kokang Chinese practice poppy cultivation, but a lot of impoverished Shan farmers were starting the practice of growing poppy.

Furthermore, only opium was traded in the Golden Triangle until the middle of the 1960s, but because of the conflict and the chaos in the frontier regions, private armies led by regional warlords were able to establish their own fiefdoms where their soldiers guarded a novel development: the establishment of laboratories where raw opium was refined into morphine and, later, heroin. Expert chemists from Hong Kong and Taiwan were brought in, and the trade in this brand-new, pricey, and extremely deadly medicine for Southeast Asia generated massive profits. The first heroin refineries in Southeast Asia were built in the middle of the 1960s in the hills of Ban Hauay Xay, Laos, which is located across the Mekong River from Chiang Khong, Thailand. Later, other refineries were built along the Thai-Burma border. The economic policies of Gen. Ne Win also contributed to the enlargement in drug production that occurred in the mid and late 1960s (Lintner, 2000, page 9).

General Ne Win's coup of 1962. All businesses and banks (foreign and otherwise), shops, industries, factories, etc., were nationalized, and business and trade by individuals and private concerns came to a dead stop. Naturally, in a situation like this, a black market economy would emerge. This was advantageous for opium traffickers because they were the only ones with the tools to take advantage of this unfortunate circumstance. They carried armed caravans of opium from ragged producers at extremely low prices to the [Thai] border where it was processed into heroin. Additionally, Thai products and commodities were brought up and sold in Shan State at very high prices on the way back from getting more opium, making a killing on both sides at least three times every year. The Burmese Way to Socialism really gave the economy to the opium traffickers rather than bringing about socialism. As a result, opium emerged as the only marketable crop. Thus, cultivation of opium, limited to east of the Salween River prior to 1963, not only spread all over Shan

State, but to Kachin, Karenni and Chin states as well (Yawnghwe, 1982).

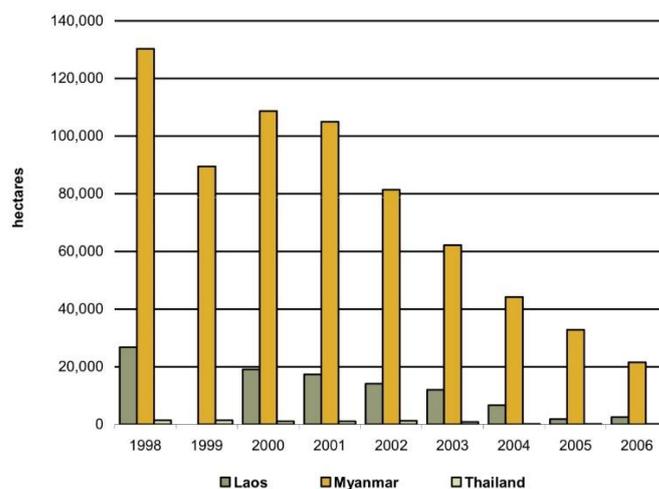
Shan State fell into chaos following the coup in 1962 and the escalation of the conflict. The predicament got worse when China, which had long been wary of the erratic general in charge in Rangoon, choose to openly support its Communist Party of Burma (CPB). Due to the support from China, Shan State turn into anarchy. There are reason why China backed the CPB: first, to instill revolutionary ideas in Burma and second, to strengthen "People's Army of Burma" destroyed all KMT strongholds in the northeastern Shan State. Thus, KMT had to evacuate their armies down to the Thai Border. Also Rangoon quickly lost the ability to defeat the innumerable rebel forces. General Ne Win had authorized the creation of local home guard group known as Ka Kwe Ye (KKY) in 1963 to combat the insurgents. In return for battling the rebels, they were granted permission to smuggle opium through all government controlled towns and roads in Shan State. The deal genuinely made many KKY commanders wealthy. The two most well-known were Chang Chifu, alias Khun Sa, who oversaw the KKY squad in Loi Maw close to the Burmese army garrison town of Tang Yan, and Luo Xinghan, the leader of the Kokang KKY.

Opium output in Burma abruptly increased by more than twofold in the late 1980s. The harvest in Burma in 1987 produced 836 tonnes of raw opium, according to the US government; by 1996, production had climbed to 2,340 tonnes. Satellite imagery showed that the area planted with poppies expanded from 92,300 hectares in 1987 to 142,700 hectares in 1989 and 154,000 hectares in 1995 (International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, 1987, 1898 and 1995). Kokang and the Wa hills, which are advantageously close to the Primary growing regions in Northern Burma and more importantly, the nearby fast expanding Chinese drug market and what appear to be simpler roads through Yunnan to the outside world, saw the establishment of a number of new heroin refineries.

In northern Burma, Methamphetamine production started in the same heroin producing laboratories. Khun Sa's old network was severely weakened, and it was further harmed when many government divisions surrounded the private army headquarters in Homong, a village next to the Thai border town of Mae Hong Son, thereby putting a chokehold on his operations. Khun Sa in the end surrendered without giving resistance to the Rangoon authorities in January 1996. The

remaining 2,000 members of Khun Sa's former army, which has resisted surrender, now refer to themselves as the Shan State Army (SSA), South.

Figure 1: Opium poppy cultivation in the Golden Triangle (hectares), 1998 - 2006



**Source:** Opium Poppy Cultivation in the Golden Triangle. Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, October 2006.

Opium poppy cultivation in the Golden Triangle region decreased from a total estimated 157,900 hectares cultivated in 1998, the year of the United Nations General Assembly Session on Drugs, to only 24,160 hectares in 2006, which corresponds to a reduction by 85% in only eight years. This is a remarkable and so far unmatched success in the reduction of illicit crops and an important step towards the goal of eliminating the cultivation of illicit crops worldwide. The largest reduction in absolute terms took place in Myanmar where opium poppy cultivation decreased from 130,300 hectares in 1998 to 81,400 in 2002 and only 21,500 hectares in 2006 (minus 83% from 1998-2006). In Laos, the area under opium poppy decreased from 26,800 hectares in 1998 to 14,100 hectares in 2002 and to only 2,500 hectares in 2006. This is a reduction by 93% between 1998 and 2006, the largest proportional reduction among the three countries. Thailand reports a reduction of the opium poppy cultivation area from 1,486 hectares in 1998 to only 157 hectares in 2006 (minus 89%), thereby almost matching Laos' reduction rate in relative terms. Laos and Thailand have both reached such low levels of opium poppy cultivation that they do no longer produce for the international opium market (Opium Poppy Cultivation in the Golden Triangle, October 2006).

The nation's total area under poppy cultivation decreased from 55,500 hectares in 2015, when it produced 647 tons, to 41,000 hectares in 2017, when it produced 550 tons. The East Shan and South Shan states saw the greatest decreases in

cultivation and production. The main reason for the decline in poppy production and cultivation in Myanmar is, China as the main market, authorities in China have claimed that an increase in cocaine trafficking into the country in 2017 – the majority of cocaine coming in bulk from South America through the continent's south-eastern coastal regions. Then, the drugs were shifted to and sold in various areas, including Oceania (Report of International Narcotics Control Board of 2018, 2019).

### Shifting of poppy cultivation from Golden Triangle to Manipur

The Golden Triangle is the region of Southeast Asia where the borders of Thailand, Laos and Myanmar intersect. It has historically been an important hub for the trade and manufacture of opium, producing about 60 percent of the world's illicit opium. Drugs produced in Myanmar is known for its high purity. In the beginning, Northeast India, especially Manipur is a trafficking route where Myanmar heroin was transported, and a large number of the heroin production labs are situated closer to the Indo-Myanmar border. The Northeastern Indian state of Manipur, however, has seen a shift in the production of poppies in recent years. There is no denying the fact that the practice, nature and process of massive opium/ poppy cultivation has now shifted to Northeast India, and to the state of Manipur in particular, from the notorious Golden Triangle (Laang, 2022).

The Press Information Bureau (PIB) reported that Manipur has historically been a paradise for opium and ganja cultivation because of its proximity to the Golden Triangle, as well as its widespread militancy, lack of employment opportunities, hilly terrain, and porous border with Myanmar (Imphal Free Press 2010). Manipur is reputed to grow very high-quality ganja and poppies. Recently, ganja growers have switched to growing poppies since the crop is more lucrative (Kipgen 2019).

In a paper presented at the UN in 1998 by Morung Makunga, the then Health Minister of Manipur, noted that Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland collectively were responsible for “smuggling of at least 20kgs of heroin daily” (Makunga, 1998). According to intelligence reports, none of the heroin that was smuggled into the area was used for local consumption. The majority of it is shifted to various locations across the nation, including international nations like United States, Europe and significant portions of India. Various brands, like ‘two lions and a globe’, ‘double globe’, ‘five star’ and ‘dangerous’ are used to sold in market. Some of the important trafficking routes in North Eastern India are:

1. Behiang- Singhat- Churachandpur- Imphal
2. Behiang- Singhat- Tipaimukh- Silchar
3. Mandalay- Tahang
4. Tamu- Moreh- Imphal
5. Homalin- Ukhrul- Jessami- Kohima
6. New Somtal (in Chandel district)- Sugnu- Churachandpur- Imphal- Kohima- Dimapur
7. Kheinan- Behiang- Churachandpur- Imphal- Kohima- Dimapur
8. Homalin- Kamjong- Shangshak Khullen- Ukhrul
9. Mandalay- Tahang- Tiddim- Aizwal- Silchar
10. Myitkina- Maingkwan- Pangsau Pass- Namnpong- Jairangpur- Digboi
11. Putao- Digboi- Pasighat (Arunachal Pradesh)- other destinations
12. Tamarthi (Myanmar)- Noklak (Nagaland- Myanmar Border)- Kohima- Dimapur

Among these routes the first eight routes passed through Myanmar-Manipur border. Besides there are several other tracks used by smugglers for illicit trafficking of heroin. After the narcotic drugs reach Imphal, Aizwal, Kohima, Silchar or Dimapur, they are dispatched to Calcutta, Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai or Bangalore and other places (Nepam, 2020).

Manipur is a gateway of the Act East Policy of India which will connect through Southeast Asian Countries. Due to this policy, Manipur is now expanding its roads and railways quite quickly. The

fact that Moreh and Behiang border posts in the state have already turned into heroin floodgates from the northwest of Myanmar, all of these raise concerns among intellectuals that this region will be the Pandora box for the international drug mafia.

Churachandpur, one of Manipur’s five district bordering Myanmar in the southwestern side of Manipur is the largest poppy grower district in Manipur. It was also the first district to be affected by opium (Phanjoubam, 1997).

Manipur-Myanmar border is just 10% fenced, making it easy for a transit point for illegal substances coming from the Golden Triangle, the epicenter of a thriving opium economy and drug trade, to Northeastern region of India. The largest narcotics bust, including heroin and methamphetamine worth more than Rs 500 crore, was discovered in a town of Moreh, a border town between Manipur and Myanmar, in December 2021. A suspected drug dealer of Myanmar origin was detained right away. According to police, drugs were smuggled out of Myanmar (Zahan, 2022). Also it is said that, altogether 393 Myanmar Nationals crossed into Manipur between 2012 and February 2023 (The Sangai Express, Feb 25, 2023).

“Every drug haul in the Northeast and most in the rest of India is somehow connected to Manipur which is very unfortunate. Despite a massive campaign since 2018, the result is not very impressive. While drug traffickers are being caught by the security, the investigations have fallen short on the real kingpins, most of whom are based in Myanmar”, said Geetchandra Mangang, Secretary General of Coalition Against Drugs and Alcohol (CADA).

To smuggle poppy into the Golden Triangle and back again, drug mafias or drug kingpins have established a robust network with Manipur and Myanmar. Drug trafficking is not a new trend in the state (Manipur); however, the unprecedented rise of poppy cultivation raises a red signal that adversely impacts the northeast regions (NER) and the rest of India (Oinam, 2022). The white flower smudges on the notes, mostly in the districts of Ukhrul, Senapati, Kangpokpi, Kamjong, Churachandpur and Tengnoupal, indicate that Manipur is no longer just a drug transit hub. Poppies are frequently grown in the hilly regions where Schedule Tribes live. These regions are also Kuki tribal dominated areas, where armed underground groups are said to be involved in controlling and funding the drug cultivation, refining and trade (Mathur, 2022).

Poppy cultivation differs from other crop cultivation in that it can be grown practically anywhere and has a stable market for its comparatively high value output. Furthermore, compare to other yield, poppies are less complicated and easier to maintain due to the poor transportation infrastructure in rural areas. Poppy farming serves the economic needs of low-income rural families. There aren't many alternatives to farming that could offer farmers financially viable chances and inducements to abandon illegal poppy cultivation given the economic situation in Manipur's hill regions (Kipgen, 2019, p 4-5).

Manipur's rural areas, where jhum cultivation is predominately practice, jhum cultivators have easy access to land, making it simpler to grow poppy alongside other crops. Poppy cultivation is encouraged by the widespread poverty in rural areas, which is partly due to the ineffectiveness of the state machinery. Armed conflicts, insurgent issues, and ethnic violence have devastated the state for decades, which has had a particularly negative impact on the people and the economy. Despite the implementation of numerous projects for rural development, it falls short in terms of reaching the last mile. In addition, today's society places a great importance on the desire to own existing appliances and modern technology as well as better education for children. In order to meet the demands of rural tribal households, the cultivation of food crops alone eventually became insufficient. In such circumstances, individuals fight for a better means of support while also struggling to survive. Poppy farming is like a "magic portion" that helps rural households quickly escape poverty.

The poppy plant can still be seen growing in a few kilometers from residential areas in a number of rural Manipur districts today. Poppy is a plant that is widely cultivated in the interior hill regions of the state, despite the Narcotic Drugs and Psychoactive Substances Act, 1985, which designates it as a contraband narcotic with psychoactive effects. Ever since roughly 10 years from now, opium has been grown illegally, but in recent years, production has multiplied. Under section 48 of the Narcotics and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, The Indian Narcotic Control Bureau has the power to seize and destroy opium poppies and other illegally grown narcotics. The law prohibits the unauthorized cultivation of opium poppy, cannabis and coco plants (Kipgen, 2019, p 3). Most of the data related to opium cultivation on Manipur reveal that poppy cultivation is still pervasive throughout the state's hill regions, despite the fact that law

enforcement organizations destroy hundreds of acres of poppy plants every year.

In June 2019 and October 2020, eight brown sugar labs were busted by Manipur police, with this eight labs, six of the labs were being located in the district of Thoubal. Although the Narcotic and Affairs of Border (NAB) conducted 50 raids on houses in Thoubal district in a single year, yet the drug manufacturing industry was not entirely destroyed. Currently, their input indicates that manufacturing labs have relocated to Kangpokpi district, which is nearer to the hills (Sonak Matharu, 2022). Fake pharmaceutical enterprises began to appear in the 1980s and 1990s in Manipur and Northeast India, where they used as fronts for the illicit refineries that produced acetic anhydride and other chemicals used in the manufacture of narcotic drugs, whose illegal refineries were spread out along the Indo-Burma border regions (Nepram, 2020).

According to the UN office on Drugs and Crime, "India has a well-developed chemical industry, which produces substantial quantities of acetic anhydride, ephedrine, pseudo-ephedrine, potassium permanganate and many other precursor chemicals. In spite of precursor control legislation and procedures being in place, several cases of diversions of significant quantities of precursor chemicals have occurred in recent years. The growing threat of traffickers establishing ATS laboratories in the region, and availability of ephedrine and pseudo-ephedrine in India is of grave concern to Indian law enforcement authorities."

## CONSEQUENCES

Across the world the implication of opium economy is multidimensional. The cultivation of poppies results in the manufacturing of opium, which is used to create narcotics like heroin and morphine. These drugs have the potential to lead to addiction, which is extremely harmful to both the person and the larger society. This is evident in Churachandpur's southern district. The Old Bazaar Road is lit up by mobile phone flashlights with teenagers hunching over as it gets dark. According to research carried out on behalf of the Churachandpur district office, 36% of kids started using drugs when they reached the age of 15 years, and 21% did so when they were just 10 years old. Manipur is one of the top five states in the country where more than 10% of the population uses opioids, according to a 2019 map of substance conducted by the ministry of social justice and empowerment (Matharu, 2022).

Growing poppies can cause a number of health problems, such as respiratory troubles, infections, and HIV/AIDS. This is due to the large number of drug users who inject substances, which can result in the transmission of infections via dirty needles. In the Northeastern regions, particularly Manipur, morphine was often used by drug addicts until the end of 1983. But from the beginning of 1984, the pattern abruptly shifted, and the number of heroin users quickly overtook those addicted to all other narcotics. Over 1,10,000 drug users and over 6,871 HIV positive cases were reported in the Northeastern states within two decades, with the Northeastern state of Manipur accounting for close to 8% of all HIV positive cases and ranking third in India (Makunga, 1998).

It is important to highlight that 76% of HIV positive cases in Manipur were IDUs (Intravenous Drug Users), in contrast to other states where 76% of HIV infections are transmitted sexually. This is the kind of havoc that narcotics have wrought in the tiny state of Manipur, which only makes up about 0.2% of India's total population. Additionally, intravenous Drug Users (IDUs) are no longer the only source for transmission. It has now spread to their offspring as well as their female sexual partners (Nepram, 2007, p 11, 12).

Some of the substances that are readily available in the state include tobacco products, Ganja, alcohol, opium, spasmoxon (SP), methamphetamine (WY), codeine cough syrup, pseudo-Ephedrine, etc. Opium, methamphetamine, and heroin are among the drugs that are illegally carried from Myanmar through Lashio, Mandalay, and Bhamo to Manipur and Mizoram via Moreh and Champhai, respectively (Das, 2018, p 583). Drug trafficking in Manipur is no longer a regional enterprise; instead, it is becoming a global industry involving drug mafias from nations like China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Nepal (E-pao, 2021). The Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act was used to jail 963 drug traffickers between April 27 and June 2019, 768 of whom were men and 195 of whom were women, according to the Manipur Narcotics and Affairs of Border (NAB) department (my Gov blog, 2019).

In China and Myanmar, there are still several powerful trafficking organizations. Additionally, it has been claimed by international observers that individuals with connections to China are directly or indirectly in charge of the Indian subcontinent's present drug trade. These Northeastern states are under Chinese influence and funding as members of a worldwide narcotics cartel; as a result, China

indirectly chooses the leaders of these states, even if it may appear that New Delhi does. India's or the Northeast's political economy today and in the future could suffer irreparable harm. The moment to take action is now, so consider where India's national security stands in respect to illegal drugs and China's omnipresent influence in South or Southeast Asia (Laang, 2022). Also it was reported that the armed tribal group signed under suspension of operations known as Kuki National Army (KNA) and Zomi Revolutionary Army (ZRA) insurgents have been instigating poppy cultivators in Manipur against the government, which has been taking action against illegal poppy cultivators and destroying poppy fields in forest lands, especially in reserve and protected areas (Choudhury, 2023)

One of the most obvious effects of poppy cultivation is on environment. This includes, major threats to the lands, soils, waters, forests, rivers that make up our ecosystems and biodiversity. In Manipur, poppy cultivation has led to large-scale deforestation in the hill districts. To create new crop sites, interior forest areas were removed, endangering the ecology. Villages close to the plantation site were forced to deal with the effects of this widespread deforestation. In the hills of Manipur, deforestation is included in a traditional method of *jhum* (shifting) cultivation. Due to the rapid increase in the number of tribal people living in the forests during the past 20 years, *Jhum* cultivation has grown significantly, particularly in the dense forest areas (Marchang, 2017). According to Joint Director of Directorate of Environment and Climate Change, T Brajakumar. "Manipur used to get 1600 millimetre of rainfall in a year but that has changed... rainfall patterns have changed in the state and the main issue is deforestation and cutting down of trees, particularly in hill areas," he said, while speaking at an awareness campaign on war on drugs and deforestation on Saturday at Pukhao Laipham, Imphal East. Deforestation is majorly caused by burning down of forest for poppy cultivation, which is a major factor causing water scarcity in the state, he added (Imphal Free Press, 2023). People in Manipur are currently experiencing climate change and struggling their lives as a result of deforestation, which not only results in water scarcity but also an increase in temperature.

In 2010, Manipur had 168 Mha of natural forest, extending over 77% of its land area. In 2021, it lost 16.8kha in natural forest, equivalent to 8.81 Mt of CO<sub>2</sub> emission. The top 2 regions were responsible for 53% of all tree cover loss between 2001 and 2021. Churachandpur had the most tree cover loss

at 64.4 kha compared to an average of 23.7 kha. Followed by Tamenglong- 47.7 kha, Ukhrul- 40.9 kha, Chandel- 37.7 kha, Senapati- 18.5 kha. The peak fire season typically begins in mid-February and lasts around 12 weeks. There were 968 VIIRS fire alerts reported between 25th of April 2022 and 24th of April 2023 considering high confidence alerts only (Global Forest Watch).

Poppy growers also use chemical fertilizers and strong pesticides to control weeds. Farmers used salt to kill unwelcome weeds and fertilizers to boost yield. As a result, children became more susceptible to water-borne illnesses like typhoid and dysentery throughout the winter as the nearby stream started to dry up (Sangpui and Kapngaihlian, 2021, p 6). Uncontrolled deforestation for poppy cultivation coupled with massive spraying of chemical fertilizers at the upland slope directly or indirectly impact on the environment as well as posing health hazards to those living in the surrounding villages (Sanjenbam 2022).

The senior Congress leader Jairam Ramesh said that while Manipur is getting urea twice the supply it needs, the farmers of state have been complaining of massive urea shortage. He accused the BJP led government in Manipur of diverting urea supply meant for farmers to opium fields, thereby boosting the poppy cultivation (Northeast Today, 2021). It shows that massive urea supply were there for boosting the poppy cultivation, that is the reason why supplying massive urea for farming but still complaining for shortage of urea. During the month of February and March, Manipur was in water crisis leading to drought and scarcity of water. PHED Minister L Susindro Meitei said that deforestation has led to decline in rainfall causing water crisis (The Sangai Express, March-17-2023). Deforestation was done on a massive scale in the hilly region for jhum cultivation, resulting water crisis, climate change, drought and soil erosion. The Chief Minister, N Biren Singh said, "As poppy plantation requires deforestation and excessive use of chemical fertilizers, it has become a major region for soil degradation and landslides in the hills."

### **Government's Initiative and Policy Response**

Despite being prohibited, poppy farming is nonetheless widely practised in Manipur. It's interesting to note how many farmers who depend on opium for their livelihood are unaware that it is prohibited. In the interiors of Manipur, the opium economy has made communities dependent on the income derived from poppy cultivation (Kipgen

2019). For many of communities, poppy farming is for survival needs rather than domestic consumption. It is a primary means to earn money to support their livelihood needs and education for their children. As a result, the government's response to the issue has been both coercive and non-coercive tactics. These includes offering poppy farmers incentives and alternate sources of income to seizing drugs, eradication drives and arresting poppy growers. For instance, in the Senapati district, the government has introduced cardamom cultivation in different places in a bid to wean people away from cultivating poppy, and to also provide them with an alternative source of income.

On November 3 and June 26, respectively, in 2018, the chief minister of Manipur declared the launch of the "War on Drugs" and "Nisha Thadoklashi" campaigns. It is a positive move, especially in light of the destruction caused by drug cultivation and distribution in the area. Apart from limiting drug sales and distribution, illegal poppy production is the main focus of the war on drugs. More drugs have been seized as a result of the statement, and vast areas of poppy cultivating land have also been destroyed. In a massive drive to destroy poppy cultivation, the chief minister announced to allocate a team of at least 100 police personnel in each district to uproot and destroy poppy plants (Karmakar, 2020).

In addition to that, apart from government agencies, civil society organizations (CSOs) were used to raise public awareness, mostly to discourage people from growing poppies. Civil society organizations and non-Governmental organizations (NGOs) like Coalition Against Drugs and alcohol (CADA), All Lilong Anti-Drug association, Meira Paibis are some organizations working to uphold the same (my Gov blog, 2019). On 25 February 2021 representatives from 33 communities in Manipur took a pledge to end poppy cultivation under the banner "All Communities Convention for a Pledge against Illegal Poppy Plantation" as a response to the chief minister's call to support the "War on Drugs" (Morung Express, 2021).

According to an official statement from the CM's Secretariat the following leaders and representatives took part in the pledge: Kharam Tribe Union (TU), Purum Tribe, Koireng TU, Thadou Inpi, Manipuri Gorkha Association, Kom TU, Chiru TU, Thangal TU, Maram Union, Mao Council, Poumai TU, Zeme TU, Anal Tangpi, Lamkang Kaver Kupun, Mongshang Tu, Moyon

TU, Aimol TU, Tarao TU, Hmar Inpi, Paite People Council, Simte TU, Zou TU, Mizo People Convention, Vaiphei People Council, Gangte TU, Tangkhul Mayar Ngala Long, Mate TU, Maring Uparup, Rongmei Tribe body, Inpui Tribe Body, Liangmai Tribe Body and Chothe TU (*Morung Express*, 2021).

The Chief Minister of Manipur said as his government was waging a war on drugs, it is imperative that those who earlier cultivated poppy should get an alternative source of livelihood. He said they can take up cultivation of lemongrass and agar tree and rear Mithun after consultation with experts (Sapam, 2018). In February 2021, Chief Minister N Biren Singh had offered a cash reward of Rs 10 Lakh to a village in the Ukhrul district for voluntarily destroying poppy plants grown in the village (Mazumdar, 2021).

The biggest risk posed by Manipur's expanding illicit poppy cultivation is that it may make the state more than just a stop on the drug trafficking route and turn it into a center for drug manufacture. The Chief Minister said that his government has seized drugs worth over Rs. 2,000 crores in the last two and a half years. Besides, over five drug manufacturing makeshift factories were busted (Laithangbam, 2020).

Under "War on Drugs" campaign, three village chiefs, one vice chairman and one secretary of Selsi village have been arrested by district police for their alleged involvement in poppy plantation (*The Sangai Express*, December 31, 2022). Continuing its renewed drive against poppy plantations and as part of the War on Drug campaign launched by the State Government, security forces destroyed poppies grown in around 50 acres of land in two days (January 4 and 5) in Chandel and Kangpokpi districts and arrested two village chiefs for their alleged involvement (*The Sangai Express*, January 6, 2023). The War on Drugs campaign continues as security forces destroyed over a hundred acres of poppy plantations in different parts of the State in a span of 24 hours (*The Sangai Express*, February 8, 2023).

## CONCLUSION

The main reason why poppy is cultivated in Manipur is that poppy grower did not gets support due to lack of infrastructure, corrupt government agencies and desire to quickly escape from poverty. Not only giving alternative crops to replace poppy but also to give people's development, skill development, and provision of employment opportunities, among other essentials of life, must be the government's main priorities. All segments of society, including the local people, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), the political organizations,

student unions, and Meira Paibi/Women Torch Bearers of Manipur, should unite and counter against this social evil in addition to strict laws against illegal drugs and their associated activities.

Additionally, the Indo-Myanmar border needs to be examined, given that this porous border is the point of entry for illegal substances into the state. The border should be properly fenced and with the effective operation of the Integrated Check Post (ICP) and Land Custom Station (LCS) at the border, revision of the Free Movement Regime (FMR) is necessary. If not, a new Golden Triangle will form in India's northeast, recreating the conflict with money obtained from drugs. Last but not least, if the issue of drug trafficking is not seriously addressed, Manipur, a possible focused region for India's Act East Policy connecting India with South East Asian Countries, will become an unsolvable security nightmare in future.

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